

However Improbable

Case File: The Many Faces of Irene Adler

MUSIC: Theme (long)

S: You're listening to *However Improbable*, a Sherlock Holmes book club that narrates and discusses Arthur Conan Doyle's classic tales. I'm Sarah Kolb.

M: And I'm Marisa Mercurio. This week, we're taking a deep look at four relatively recent adaptations' takes on Conan Doyle's most famous woman. This is our case file on the many faces of Irene Adler!

S: In this case file, we're talking about iterations of Irene Adler in three television series and a film. We're interested in seeing how they vary from the original story, what they have in common or don't, and what these versions of an incredibly fascinating character have to say about gender, sexuality, morality, and more.

You can listen to both our narration and discussion episode about "A Scandal in Bohemia" by going back a few episodes! We talk a lot more in depth about the plot and impact of this story in that discussion, so you don't want to miss it.

M: This episode will chronologically cover the Granada Holmes episode "A Scandal in Bohemia," Guy Ritchie's film *Sherlock Holmes*, the BBC *Sherlock* episode "A Scandal in Belgravia," and finally the Irene Adler plotline in *Elementary* season 1—particularly the two-part finale "The Woman" and "Heroine." Needless to say, there'll be spoilers. So if you're trying to avoid plot twists—like the big one in *Elementary*—come back when you've watched season one!

S: We also want to say that, while we're making every effort to be analytical about these episodes and our conversation, these are our opinions on them. You certainly don't have to agree with us to enjoy the podcast! Full disclosure—we don't love what BBC *Sherlock* does with this character, but we also know a lot of people love that show a lot. If that's how you feel, maybe this isn't the episode for you.

M: So let's start with Granada Holmes... kind of the gold standard as far as adaptations go. This story—their very first episode—doesn't disappoint. It's essentially beat by beat the plot of Conan Doyle's story with the notable exception that Watson isn't married—nor does he ever get married in the series!

S: They leave that out of the story but they leave out of the whole thing.

M: It honestly makes more sense if we're going with our chronology like we talked about in our last episode.

S: The other thing is for some reason they pronounce Irene "I-ray-nuh."

M: I-ray-nuh Ad-ler! Good evening, I-ray-nuh Ad-ler!

S: I-ray-nuh Ad-ler! It's not quite that bad but it's a little weird and I've read somewhere—I will have to find a source for this 'cause I could have made it up—but I'm read somewhere it was because they wanted her name to sound more European.

M: Why? She's from New Jersey.

S: As we discussed, she is from New Jersey. So, who knows.

M: *NJ accent* Ay, Irene Adler!

S: *NJ accent* Ay, Irene! I'm walking here! Sorry.

M: I would rather that. I don't think we need to talk a ton about the Granada episode because, like we said, it is essentially the same exact plot as the short story. And also because we talked about it to some degree in our Granada Holmes episode, but do you have any particular thoughts about this adaptation?

S: I mean, it's a really beautiful episode. I think what it proves is that it can be done. You can just take SCAN and put it on screen and not change that dynamic that Conan Doyle wrote and it's good, which, we're going to see, lots of other people do stick with that.

M: And it really maintains all of the crucial themes and character dynamics. It's got Godfrey Norton and it has phenomenal disguises. Just one of my favorite things ever about that story but then also Granada Holmes as a series is how good all the different characters are in disguise. Like, Jeremy Brett is fantastic and we get two different disguises in the story. I think the woman who plays Irene—

S: Her name is Gayle Hunnicutt.

M: Gayle Hunnicutt. That's kick ass. She does a great job in this episode. I think she is very elegant, very stately, and very self-possessed, and she looks great in a men's suit.

S: She wears some really beautiful coats. The costumes are good in this one too.

M: And clearly loves Godfrey Norton.

S: The king has a hilarious mustache, but that seems about right. The gold standard. It's page to screen. Next, we want to talk about Guy Ritchie's Sherlock Holmes movie.

M: Full disclosure, we love this movie.

S: We do. I think what we're gonna do for our one year anniversary of this podcast is do episode on this movie. Just in case you're not familiar with Guy Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes*, it was made in 2009. Robert Downey Jr. plays Holmes. Jude Law plays Watson. Roughly the plot is that Holmes and Watson are hired by a secret society to foil a mystic's plot to take control of England. Irene Adler hinders, then helps, then hinders again—then gets thwarted by Holmes at the last minute. And in this adaptation, she's played by Rachel McAdams.

M: Yes. It's very over-the-top. It doesn't take itself too seriously, which is I think why we both like this movie so much despite its many foibles. Obviously, this is not a perfect film. It's not a perfect adaptation of Sherlock Holmes by any means, but it's so fun and it's just ridiculous and the costuming is beautiful.

S: For all of these adaptations, the questions I really wanted to look at was what we think it is doing as an adaptation, what traits of Irene's they pull from the story, and what do they get somewhere else. So let's start with just a very broad overview of what it's doing as an adaptation in the first place.

M: In this film, she is presented as a antagonist towards Holmes but they have a romantic dalliance that apparently was in the past but still maintains an affection for one another and is always figured as a temptation between the two of them, particularly on Holmes's side. She really wields the power in that relationship, at least through her feminine wiles. But she enters his life in the middle of this case and it becomes clear that she is wrapped up in it to some degree and she has her own motivations going forward.

S: The movie as a whole and their version of Irene, it really just wants to have a good time. They're not concerned with book accuracy and I'm not really concerned that it's not particularly book accurate. That's not what this movie's trying to do. Like you hinted at, there are some things in this character that pulls in some tropes that I do love the

most, even though there are things that are totally not in the book that I think are really fun in what they do with her.

M: Yeah, I really do like that they make her into a fully fleshed-out adventuress.

S: She's like a professional criminal.

M: Which, as we talked about in our last episode, is not accurate. And although they are somewhat antagonistic in the short story SCAN, it is full-blown in this adaptation in which Irene is literally a criminal. But you're right in that it's really just trying to have fun, but again it does fall into the very common pitfall of making their relationship explicitly romantic/sexual.

S: In terms of things that they get right off the page. I don't think it's very many. Again, I don't think that this film is worried about. They really capitalize on this idea of her being an adventuress, the world traveler who is living her own independent life and getting into things. She makes a crack about the marriage that didn't stick. That might be a little bit of a hint of what the plot of SCAN actually is. A little detail I love is that Watson describes her as one of the three people who ever beat Holmes. He says that in the stories later on and they really played at up to the max here with hinting at what these characters' history is.

M: And of course, that suit!

S: The menswear. Rachel McAdams in that suit.

M: That suit! *The* suit and *the* woman.

S: It's it.

M: It is absolutely it. And just for clarification, we're talking about the lovely brown tweed suit with the fuschia lining.

S: She wears it in the climax of the movie.

M: And it's a three-piece suit too, I believe.

S: Briefly, she has a little hat.

M: Hugely significant in the history of cinema and in our personal lives.

S: That suit, they were like “What do some college-aged bisexuals need to see on screen in 2009?” And it was Rachel McAdams in this outfit. Brain-breaking.

M: We're here for the Jude Law and the Rachel McAdams of it all.

S: Jude Law. Clearly we have lots of thoughts about this movie.

M: Bisexual fodder, essentially, is this movie.

S: Oh, yeah. They're throwing us the biggest bone.

M: Anyway!

S: So the second question is what do they invent? What comes from somewhere else? Like you said, this concept of her as a professional thief obviously is a bit of a stretch from what she is on screen. I don't hate it. I think it's fun.

M: It is fun. They also align her with Moriarty, which I don't love just because I think, again, that it is one of those common failings of adaptations that seeks to make Irene a villain or at least criminal and antagonistic in a way that does not at all reflect the intent of SCAN.

S: Right. I think that's an important point because she is antagonistic towards Holmes's ends in SCAN, but Holmes is wrong as we have discussed, which means that she's really in the right. He's the one doing petty crime in SCAN. Adaptations that take that dynamic and then say, “No, she's like a villain” kind of make me crazy.

M: I agree. And it's something that you see in so many adaptations even though we praised *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*, it also does that. Again, even though it's not literally Irene Adler, it kind of basically is. It's playing out that relationship.

S: I think that they could very well have written this character into this plotline and had her be mildly antagonistic, but not attach her to Moriarty who's the big villain.

M: Big bad.

S: That bums me out a little.

M: And the romantic presentation of this does nothing for me personally. As we will talk about definitely when we cover this movie, it is so homoerotic. I mean, it is, right? I'm not saying that as a person who would like to be the case.

S: No, it's just a stone-cold fact.

M: It's a stone-cold fact and they play it up even more so in the sequel. It's a very intentional presentation and it's playing off the familiar tropes of the Holmes and Watson marriage dynamic and their domesticity together. And the way that Holmes is incredibly jealous of Mary Morstan, you know, essentially becoming destabilized because Watson is moving out of Baker Street. The way that they then slot Irene Adler into that dynamic doesn't do much for me when there's already the love triangle going on between Watson, Holmes, and Mary Morstan.

S: Yeah, that's a good way to summarize it. And going off that, something they invent for the story is that Holmes and Irene and also Watson attached to this have history. This is not the first time meeting them and there's stuff in their path that has happened that we don't know. It gets slyly alluded to.

M: I love this actually.

S: Yeah, I think it's really great.

M: I want a that trio to go on adventures together 'cause possibly my favorite scene or sequence in that film is when they are in the abattoir and they get all hooked up on the pig slicing machine, whatever you call that. And they've got to pull her down and she's got this cool blouse and trousers on. But they're all working very much in tandem like they know each other and are familiar with each other and the way that they work and they are all striving towards the same end, which is so that Irene does not get sliced down the middle.

S: Sliced in half.

M: But I also really like how it dips essentially into a horror film and that the way they all three are pitted against the police in that moment.

S: It's very fun. It works really well. That's all fabricated, but I don't care. It's a good time. The final thing, of course, is that Holmes wins their confrontation and Irene specifically does not come out on top because of her sentimental feelings.

M: Not great! Watson hitting home that idea of Irene beating Holmes in the past feels like a cop-out so that they can then make Holmes defeat Irene at the end of this film.

S: That's a good point.

M: And it's really unsatisfying especially in the way that it is because of the sentimentality between the two characters or at least on Irene's part, and that she refuses to go all the way along with Moriarty. Irene and Moriarty are on the train together and Moriarty chastises Irene for allowing her silly little feminine emotions to get the better of her.

S: And he is using her affection for Holmes to get her to be involved in his plot. Again totally missing the point of who she is as a character. Literally she's like, "Who is this guy? Why is he in my house? Go away."

M: "Go away." And I do think, like we said, in terms of that Holmes/Watson/Irene Adler history could be done so well and so fun where they do work together and that Irene and Holmes become this dynamic in which they respect one another and which they are very similar. Because they are somewhat similar, actually, in this film.

S: Totally. I see that aspect.

M: I think throwing the whole wrench in of romance just ruins all the goodness of that.

S: This is from—I'll link this really great article from The Baker Street Babes in the show notes—but this is a quote that I thought kind of sums up my feelings on this from one of their articles about Irene Adler and adaptations. What they had to say was: "All nods to her strength of character and her feminism. But surely we ought to question why nowadays Irene must be a villain in order to exist in a narrative." Good question, Baker Street Babes.

M: It's like these adaptations don't know what to do with a woman who doesn't want anything to do with Sherlock Holmes and that she is concurrently independently thinking and as smart, if not smarter, than him.

S: And living her own life that does not revolve around what he's up to. On that topic, let's talk about "A Scandal in Belgravia."

M: Yes, so the BBC *Sherlock* episode of "A Scandal in Belgravia" aired in 2012. It is the first episode of their second season. It is written by Steven Moffat. This is a 90-minute

episode and there are many plot twists and many turns and movements throughout the entire episode, so it's a little bit difficult to condense into a very brief summary but I'm going to try: As Holmes investigates a series of cases, Watson's documentation of their work on his blog increases Holmes's clients but he is largely disinterested with the mysteries presented. That is, until he is called by Buckingham Palace to investigate Irene who is a dominatrix with state secrets pulled from her clients. She initially wins out over Holmes, but the final hour instead culminates in Irene's defeat in which Holmes deduces a paramount code and then saves her life.

S: Yes.

M: Lots of little things that I don't totally understand what was going on. It's a very convoluted plot. There are CIA agents from the United States in it.

S: There's a plane filled with dead people.

M: Moriarty's sort of mentioned. There's a lot going on.

S: Yeah. Benedict Cumberbatch is Sherlock Holmes. Martin Freeman is Watson. Lara Pulver plays Irene Adler. Andrew Scott briefly makes a cameo as Jim Moriarty.

M: This is a hugely popular TV series and as it aired in 2012m because of the success of the first season, people were really looking forward to this episode. I can't quite remember—'cause I saw the first season not as it aired, but close after.

S: Yeah. I watched when they were all done together.

M: And so I do remember this episode coming out. By the time that season 2 came out, I had seen season one and I was up-to-date with it I believe. It's sort of hard to remember 'cause it's been almost a decade.

S: Wild.

M: And I think a lot of the feelings that I had about this episode at that time when it came out, I still have. We just re-watched this.

S: Yeah, we both watched it and for both of us I think it had been years.

M: Yeah, basically since it came out.

S: And I was trying to have a very open mind and think maybe, you know, it's been a long time. There was a lot of Internet discourse about *Sherlock* back in the day. Maybe that was coloring the way that I was remembering this and I don't think it was.

M: I would like to preempt this conversation about BBC *Sherlock* and actually look back on the Guy Ritchie film too with this article that I found. It was published in the *Neo-Victorian Studies Journal* called "The Naked Truth: The Postfeminist Afterlives of Irene Adler" by Antonija Primorac. This article specifically attends to adaptations of Irene in BBC *Sherlock* and both Guy Ritchie films. The author argues that the overt sexualization through which Irene is figured as a criminal/love interest for Holmes sublimates her canonical agency and reifies gender norms. So it is essentially saying that this tendency of adaptations to "liberate" women—Victorian characters—by sexualizing them instead does the opposite and just reifies traditional gender norms. The article explores "the blatant and much overlooked loss of Victorian female characters' agency that takes place in the process of 'updating' Victorian texts in contemporary screen adaptations through the – now almost routine – 'sexing up' of the proverbially prudish Victorians." The author is arguing that there is tension between the urge to liberate the Victorians by sexualizing them and this tendency towards actually traditional or neoconservative gender roles that they end up doing and that ends up eroding the Victorian characters' agency.

S: Undoing the work that was inherent in the story in the first place.

M: Yes, exactly. And that about both the Guy Ritchie film and BBC *Sherlock*.

S: I see that in both of these adaptations a lot. BBC *Sherlock*'s goal as an adaptation I think they wanted to present a modern—prestige TV is maybe the term I would use—version of these stories. They are full of allusions and references and are well-edited. They're very fast-paced. Loosely, they're trying to take the story set in the Victorian era and put them in the modern era and change or adapt things as they go.

M: One thing I really do like about this episode and it's probably in other episodes as well, but it is a point of emphasis at the beginning of this one, is Watson as a blogger.

S: Yeah.

M: And that's the way that it presents Watson's narration, which I quite like. And their whole tiff between Holmes not understanding why that's so popular when he's written his monograph on tobacco and Watson's blog is really popular. And so I like that and the idea of that is what makes Holmes really popular amongst his clients.

S: And, in terms of what they get from the original story, very loosely, like you said, the first 30 minutes of the plotline. Holmes kind of dresses up as a vicar to get into her house, but things go awry from there. The loose idea that there's a royal client who hires him to retrieve an item that's perilous. So they start, I guess, with the premise of SCAN but then obviously it...

M: Goes completely goes off the rails after that. So, let me ask you about the way that Irene is presented in BBC *Sherlock*. She's a dominatrix. She's ostensibly a lesbian, although that is entirely backtracked. What are your feelings on presenting Irene as a dominatrix?

S: My problems with the presentation of this character are not that someone is choosing to write her as a sex worker. That's not my issue necessarily because I think that's the storyline that someone hypothetically out there could write with care and nuance and you make it very interesting. I think it's more that the people writing this episode probably don't know any sex workers. And they're certainly not thinking about them as people, and their real political position. I think they were thinking in terms of what she looks like and how she acts and what her job is. They're thinking—what is going to be sort of shocking and titillating for this character? And they wanted sexual liberation and they wanted something surprising and unexpected. I guess on the surface it's like, "Oh, that's what you're doing with Irene Adler?" but that's not what my problem is. What my problem is that as a character she's rendered very 2D and it doesn't live up to how rich she is in the stories. It's definitely a bit of a letdown for me.

M: Yeah, I agree. I have no problem with a Irene as a sex worker and I actually think that the idea of her collecting blackmail and images from her clients in that way is kind of compelling. It doesn't totally fit with what Irene does in the short story because we know that she's specifically not trying to blackmail people, but she does say in this episode that her her phone is her protection, which is what Irene says about the photograph in the short story. That's only the first 30 minutes of this episode, right? By the end of the first 30 minutes, she does defeat Holmes and gets away but then the last hour is entirely built around this idea of both Holmes and Irene having this affection for one another, but much more so on Irene's side. Or at least her sentiment is what ends up allowing Holmes to defeat her very explicitly at the end of the episode.

S: That ridiculous plotline about her phone password. I see some similarities in this story and in the Irene Adler storyline and in the Ritchie film that we just discussed that an antagonist pushed to the max. She's a femme fatale character. She's working with Moriarty. None of which is the case or anywhere near close to the story. And also, one

of the things that really stuck on me watching this for the first time in a while is I hate this implication that she's interested or paying attention to Holmes before meeting him. For some reason, that really bugged me 'cause I'm like... you're totally missing what this is supposed to be. The whole point is Holmes is totally disrupting her life.

M: She really wants nothing to do with him. You know, it's so hard to divorce my feelings about this episode and Irene's presentation from what is frankly homophobia scattered throughout the entire episode. Especially because, you know, it's not separate from Irene's storyline. Irene asserts that she's gay. Watson—

S: In the same conversation!

M: Is so concerned that people know that he is not gay. From the beginning of the episode. And then again he sort of shouts to an empty warehouse that he's not gay. Not great!

S: It's an example of—maybe like when we talked about *Private Life*, we talked a little bit about showing queerness without saying explicitly. Literally all she does is she says that she's gay, but there's nothing... She speaks to her assistant. Does she speak to any other women? This episode does not pass the Bechdel Test.

M: No, I don't think so. I think the problem with her assertion with her being gay... Frankly, I would love a gay Irene Adler but it's not necessary. But the problem with it is that, of course, by the end of the episode, she falls for Holmes. He provides very elaborate evidence to demonstrate that she actually has emotions for him. He talks about how her pupils are dilated, how her pulse has increased, and so it is supposed to confirm that she has affection for him.

S: Is attracted to him.

M: And so that does frustrate me quite a bit because I'm like... why would you say that she's gay if she's not?

S: Yeah, what's the point of that?

M: Bisexual people will say that they're gay, but I don't think that's this is.

S: Watching this episode, I feel like these TV creators want to do a version of Doyle's most famous woman that's going to be surprising and shocking and different but they

don't seem to know how to present her without putting her through the lens of the "strong female character."

M: I think this episode suffers very heavily under the Joss Whedon syndrome.

S: Yeah, absolutely.

M: Which just means that the only young women that are being written are the ones that the writer finds attractive. And of course all her strength must come through her sexuality.

S: Holmes breaks into her safe by guessing her measurements.

M: It's so gross.

S: That's not empowering, it's creepy!

M: It's a tricky terrain to discuss because on one hand, obviously, for some women showing their body is empowering and I think that's great. and sexuality absolutely should be empowering for people. However, the way that it is depicted—the method by which it is depicted—is the issue in this episode.

S: And, of course, the difference is individual women make individual choices, but she's not a woman. She's a character.

M: She's a caricature.

S: She's not a person making decisions, she is a character being written by a male writer.

M: And of course, like the Guy Ritchie, it goes out of its way to demonstrate Holmes beating Irene, which is exactly the opposite of the point of SCAN.

S: She loses because of her sentimental feelings for him. And then it's like, in case this was not enough, in the last 30 seconds she is about to be decapitated by scary ambiguous Muslim terrorists and he literally saves her life.

M: Oh, it's bad.

S: It's just like... what?

M: Right, yeah. I mean, he says when he is deducing that she actually is attracted to him Holmes says that, "Sentiment is a chemical defect found in the losing side," which I think is a very highly gendered statement to be making. He is very clearly conflating Irene's womanhood with losing with sentiment with "defects" in this episode. Going off what you were saying about the trope of of the scary Muslim terrorist, which is, let's be clear, very racist.

S: Extremely racist. You have to try really hard to be more racist than Arthur Conan Doyle, but they did it.

M: They do a pretty good job. At least that's translated from page to screen. In that article, Primorac writes, "The unexpected appearance in *Sherlock* of this orientalised figure of the veiled woman – as visual shorthand for oppressed women of the former colonial space which also, implicitly, carries a justification for recent neocolonial military interventions – also serves to reinforce the postfeminist notion of freedom defined by the image of an overtly sexual Western woman." It's essentially grappling with what we in the West often mistakenly assumed is liberation through the sexualization and the nudity of female bodies. When that's contrasted to a covered up female body that is nonWestern. So, it is juxtaposing what it is saying is feminist versus what is not feminist in a very reactionary way. I think the reason that Irene Adler is figured as a dominatrix and that they chose to go that route, is so that they can make all these little clever witticisms about "beating" someone. And by the end of the episode, Irene is the one who is on her knees and about to be brutalized and that Holmes is the one who gets to save her from that. So it goes from this very "strong liberated female character" who was in full possession of her sexuality to the end in which she is fully covered and is conflated with the disempowered Muslim woman in the show's perspective so that Holmes, the white man, can enter the "Oriental" space and save the white woman.

S: Oh, it's just gross. Gross all the way down. Yeah, I did not enjoy rewatching this episode.

M: I did not either.

S: And I don't really need to watch it again.

M: No, I will wait another ten years before I feel the need to watch it.

S: That's for the best. So, finally, we want to talk about not specifically just one episode but a plot arc of the first season of *Elementary*. This season came out in 2013. The

Irene Adler plotline lurks in the background of their first season and comes to a head in their two-part season finale “The Woman” and “Heroine.” Jonny Lee Miller plays Holmes. Lucy Liu plays Joan Watson. And Natalie Dormer plays Irene Adler. Through the course of the first season, we get this backstory that unspools as we go. We learn that Irene was Holmes’s lover for a while when he was living in London. An American artist. She died. She was killed by the mysterious M we later learn is the criminal Moriarty’s chief assassin Sebastian Moran played very wonderfully by Vinnie Jones. Her death, his resulting failure to figure out who her killer was, sends Holmes into a tailspin. Eventually, that is why he overdoses and that kicks off the plot of the story. But wait! She’s not dead. But wait! She’s not even really Irene Adler.

M: This is a really complicated episode and series to talk about within the context of Irene Adler because when we are talking about Irene Adler, she’s not really even Irene Adler. Irene Adler as a person does not exist in *Elementary*. So—major spoilers here—and we will be talking about the first season of *Elementary* in its own separate case file in which we can get more into depth about the intricacies of this season, which is difficult to do in such a short time span because there are like 22 episodes.

S: Yeah, it’s a lot. And this builds. We slowly learn this stuff as it goes. And it concludes quite nicely.

M: So, let’s talk about what *Elementary* is doing as an adaptation. My feeling is that *Elementary* is very purposefully grappling with both the canon and recent adaptations. It mines the longevity of Sherlock Holmes, proving that, for example, Watson being a man in the canon isn’t why the stories endure. It effectively asks how far can we push the canon and still demonstrably perform an obvious Sherlock Holmes adaptation. It wants to know *why* the stories endure and *what makes them endure*. For example, making Watson a woman demonstrates that the reason we love Sherlock Holmes and the reason why the stories continue to be adaptable on watchable is not inherently because of Watson being a man for example. Or, on the other hand, it being set in 19th century London. Or London at all.

S: yeah and I also think that the next thing and it does on top of that is it questions and contests recent adaptations, like some of the things that we’ve been talking about. What’s really exciting and interesting and very unique in this adaptation with her version of Irene Adler is they intentionally subvert your expectations. We kind of assumed going into it, at least I definitely remember watching the first season of the show knowing that there was something up when she reappears and when you find out she’s not really dead, knowing that was suspicious. Knowing that has to do something with Moriarty

because that's a trend in other adaptations. And then they get to pull the rug out from under you and do something even wilder with it.

M: Right. I think it's a really good point that *Elementary* is very specifically dealing with the recent adaptations because, like you said, I think that is the expectation of the audience is that Irene Adler is going to be working with Moriarty or she's villainous in some way. We also know at this point when she reappears that Moriarty is lurking in the background and that he's up to some nefarious things, but we don't know what it is or who he is. Casting Natalie Dormer too was like, "Oh, she's gonna have a big part. She's gonna be really significant."

S: Yeah, you're not casting her as a bit part.

M: And I think we should clear here that if you have not seen *Elementary* and don't plan on watching it that the big reveal is that when Irene returns to Holmes and Watson's life as Irene, it is later revealed—is soon revealed in the that double feature finale—that Natalie Dormer is actually Moriarty. That Irene Adler is a mask that Moriarty put on in order to investigate Holmes as a person because Holmes, when he was consulting with Scotland Yard, was disrupting Moriarty's plans.

S: So she literally invents a character. Talk about Irene as a character. Invents a character she thinks will work to get close to this guy to figure out what his deal is. I think early on her motivation is to get him out of the way, so he's not stressing her criminal empire. We get that wonderful plot twist, that wonderful change in costume. It's well-executed and really exciting.

M: It's really good.

S: Jamie Moriarty.

M: Yes, her name is Jamie Moriarty. So, do you wanna talk about what traits they pull from the canon?

S: This is a tricky question to answer because, of course like we said, they're playing with our expectations. If you're familiar with the Holmes cannon and you're assuming someone who's going to be into watching *Elementary* has a passing understanding, you expect certain things from a character named Irene Adler. And they twist that. Looking at the version of the character that we meet first, this is the first adaptation that recognizes she's an artist. In this, she's a visual artist. She's not a performer.

M: Right, she's a painter.

S: That's still a nice thing to throw in there. She's very much positioned as Holmes's intellectual equal both as Irene and as Moriarty.

M: And, in fact, as Moriarty, kind of like what Natalie said in our most recent episode when she was talking about that she actually realized that Irene is not Holmes's equal. She's his superior. I also think that there's a lot of really direct language coming from SCAN throughout the series and increasingly as the show progresses. There are a million Easter eggs, so that if you are familiar with the canon, you can see how adeptly they are engaging with those stories. Holmes says to Watson at some point that Irene was "*the* woman" and that "she eclipsed the whole of her gender" in his mind.

S: I like when they do that. They will do that within the show where they'll drop just one little line or phrase right from a very Victorian style of writing into a CBS procedural and it's always so good. I love it every time.

M: It's really cohesive and I think it works really well.

S: What varies? What do they do differently?

M: It's hard to say, again, because they are grappling with audience expectations and Irene Adler is not literally Irene Adler. She's someone else entirely. So, I think it's hard to talk about this, but like we said, it is engaging with recent adaptations, specifically BBC *Sherlock* and the Guy Ritchie films. In terms of that finale—the two-part finale—it is similar to BBC *Sherlock* and to the Guy Ritchie film in that Moriarty actually, not Irene Adler, her affection for Holmes is part of her downfall. But I think it's really significant that it diverges from those versions because Holmes himself does not defeat Irene Adler/Moriarty. And he is also in love with her and his love for her makes him unable to solve the mystery. He is actually going to flee the country and try to wait till things wash over and so that Watson will be safe. Watson is the one who figures it all out. And she is the one who comes up with the plan to defeat Moriarty. It turns that idea of sentimentality on its head as both something that Moriarty and Holmes are susceptible to, and that we still have a woman who defeats Moriarty in the end. So it does fall into that category of this romanticization between the characters, but it's doing things very differently in its method.

S: It's very different intentionally and the way it plays out is very different. And the fact that Watson gets to be the one. Part of her arc is proving her worth as a detective and that's where she belongs and what she wants to do. And that moment of she's the one who gets to do that I think is so awesome.

M: Yeah, it's really meaningful. Because the show is really about that partnership above all else.

S: Even the *Elementary* plotline is doing something very different and it pulls it off very well, but you know I wonder if they had really tried to do Irene Adler as a character what they would have come up with?

M: I think you're right. I think they could have done something slightly different in *Elementary*. It didn't have to be Irene Adler who Holmes had that relationship with. It could have been a completely different character.

S: I get why they did it, but I'm sort of like, "But could've been?" Their version of Kitty Winter is so good so I mourn that a little bit. Just kind of wrap this up, I think the concept that this master criminal would invent an Irene Adler character as the character that most like be attractive to Sherlock Holmes is really on the nose. It's funny to me.

M: Do you have any final thoughts about these adaptations as a group? Anything that you were noticing across these four different versions of Irene Adler?

S: A big thing that you see here, Granada aside, is this villainization of her character. *Elementary* I would include in this. Again, this idea that you can't have this brilliant, self-possessed, very independent woman who we have established is smarter and perhaps superior to Sherlock Holmes—you can't have her exist in an adaptation if she's not attached to him or her interests are not revolving around him in some way. And I think that it's hard because of course he's our main character and so you have to have her play into that somehow, but that's the challenge, I think: to do the story right is how do you make that work without changing her motivations, without changing what she wants? Every time it happens, and most of the time, that's where it goes, I despair a little.

MUSIC: Outro theme

S: Join us next week for our case file on *My Dearest Holmes* by Rohase Piercy. You can find her book on our Bookshop if you'd like to read along. The link's in the show notes. You can send your thoughts to howeverimprobablepod@gmail.com or reach us

on Twitter @ImprobablePod and our website howeverimprobablepodcast.com, where you can find transcripts, the research behind the episode, and suggestions for further reading. If you enjoyed the show and can spare a moment, please rate and review.

M: *However Improbable* is created by Marisa Mercurio and Sarah Kolb with apologies to Arthur Conan Doyle. Thank you so much for listening and until next time, dear listeners, believe us to be very sincerely yours.

MUSIC concludes